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AUTHOR Baum, Elizabeth C.
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ABSTRACT

A Colorado school district has evolved a plan for continuous updating of curriculum that is broad in scope, involves the external environment, and integrates the efforts of citizens and educators. The first step of the external audit process involves the development of goals and an overview of a state-of-the-art program by the program manager and a research team of individuals from outside the program. The second step uses an opinion search to collect viewpoints from lay and professional members of the community about the desired and existing programs. The third step uses self-study involving an analysis of the existing program by its manager. Step 4 examines discrepancies utilizing an onsite audit of the existing program and a comparison of it with the desired program by an external audit team. The fifth step is an improvement plan, a corrective response to the report of the external audit team. This audit process allows (1) students to know that experiences learned are oriented to the real world, (2) teachers to know that their ideas will be recognized, (3) program directors to gain a fresh perspective, and (4) areas of improvement to be identified. Concluding the paper are five references. (WTH)

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Elizabeth C. Baum, Presenter, Golden, Colorado
Clinic A-18 - The Board's Role in Evaluating the Curriculum
NSBA National Convention - April 4, 1987 - San Francisco

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A DESIGN FOR ACHIEVING EXCELLENCE: THE EXTERNAL AUDIT OF INSTRUCTIONAL PROGRAMS

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A DESIGN FOR ACHIEVING EXCELLENCE: THE EXTERNAL AUDIT OF INSTRUCTIONAL PROGRAMS

THE LARGEST COLORADO SCHOOL DISTRICT HAS EVOLVED A PLAN FOR CONTINUOUS UPDATING OF CURRICULUM THAT IS BROAD IN SCOPE, INVOLVES THE EXTERNAL ENVIRONMENT, AND INTEGRATES THE EFFORTS OF CITIZENS AND EDUCATORS

Educational practices are rarely improved by polemical political advocacy. It is probably unfortunate that serious educational issues in our society have become a focal point for political controversy.

We live in an atmosphere in which the nation's educational concerns are addressed by broad rhetorical phrases such as "A Nation at Risk". A plethora of national, regional, and statewide studies have been issued making specific recommendations to local schools about their pay schedules, testing programs, curriculum, length of the school day, the school calendar, promotion and graduation policies, etc. Phrases such as "merit pay", "competency testing", "tuition tax credits", and "time on task" have become part of the common vocabulary in state legislative debates throughout America.

At its worst, this rising tide of rhetoric serves to distract a concerned citizenry from an involved concern with concrete, practical problems in their local educational communities. We believe, however, that it is possible for local school districts to reap some benefits from increased citizen concern with educational problems. To turn this concern to constructive ends, local school districts must establish active, working relationships with citizens in their communities using them to identify specific areas of concern in their own community and involving them actively in programs to address such specific concerns.

We believe that Jefferson County School District's program for external audits of its curriculum exemplifies an almost ideal manner of responding to citizens' concerns about excellence in their schools.

The external audit of curriculum originally grew out of concerns expressed by a local citizens' advisory group. A process was developed which is responsive to the community and insures a logical relationship between the concrete problems addressed and the solutions developed.

Historically, the District has been committed to thoughtful curriculum development and improvement. Even before the impetus of the Colorado Accountability Law, enacted in 1972, which required all schools to have a process for establishing local educational goals and for stating "outcomes" for learning, the Board of Education created a system of local-school and geographic-area citizen advisory committees, and a district-wide citizens' accountability committee, the School Improvement Process Council. These groups now augment the efforts of existing curriculum councils, composed largely of citizens in

the community, who had for some time reviewed all curriculum at the elementary, junior high, and senior high levels.

Recognizing the need, expressed by one such citizens' advisory committee, for continuous, systematic updating of the District's curriculum, our School Board asked the school community in 1980 to devise a process "to systematically and continuously review and upgrade the District's educational programs, insuring adequate input from appropriate administrators, teachers, students, and community members.[1] The Board's mandate was intended to assure that:

- o programs would be evaluated to determine if they were appropriate to the changing needs of students and society;
- o an assessment of the strengths, weaknesses, and needs of existing programs would be conducted and the results reported;
- o at least two curricular areas would be reviewed thoroughly every year, and that each curricular area would be reviewed once every six years; and
- o the roles of the District's elementary, junior high, and senior high curriculum councils would be redefined to involve them as an integral part of the total audit process.

The Board entrusted the task of creating and of testing an external audit procedure to a group consisting of citizens and of staff members from the curriculum councils, and to the Assistant Superintendent and two Directors of Instruction. After a year of research and discussion, the experimental procedure was tested successfully on the District's science program. In 1982, a report on the District's science curriculum was delivered to the Board, and the working group became the permanent Committee for the External Audit of Instructional Programs, chaired by a citizen and charged with oversight of the review process.

The most distinctive features of the review process are its emphasis on citizen involvement and a review by individuals external to the program being audited. Other curriculum review processes, e.g., the North Central Association; Bulach, 1978, included only educators.[2] We involve not only our immediate community, but also draw upon research by national and international authorities and the viewpoints of authorities in academic settings and in the world of work.

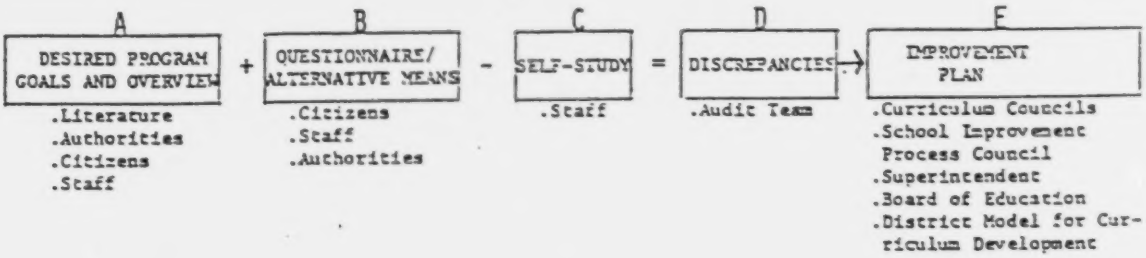
The purpose of the audit procedure is straightforward: to stay abreast of rapid changes and growth in knowledge so that our curriculum continues to meet the changing needs of our students. To accomplish this, we will periodically examine the state of the art in each curriculum area, compare the content and structure of the curriculum to the state of the art, review how we deliver curriculum to students, and decide how we can improve our efforts.

(10 MINUTE SLIDE PRESENTATION)

"The audit process should provide rationale and direction for future program development: revision or updating of program objectives, determination of sources of support, interdisciplinary opportunities, inservice opportunities, program revision, etc." Program Manager, Social Studies Department.

The external audit procedure involves a discrepancy model, developed by Malcolm Provus,[3] modified from the model as used by Project Synthesis, a National Science Foundation education project carried out at the University of Colorado.[4]

EXTERNAL AUDIT MODEL



The five steps, characterized by their products, include the:

- o Desired Program: Development of goals and an overview of a state of the art program by the program manager and a research team composed of individuals from outside the program.

- o Questionnaire or alternate opinion search: A means for collecting viewpoints from lay and professional members of the school community about both the desired and existing programs.

- o Self-Study: A detailed analysis of the existing program by its manager.

- o Discrepancies: An on-site audit of the existing program and a comparison of it with the desired program by an external audit team to determine the differences.

- o Improvement plan: A corrective response to the report of the external audit team.

The procedure is rigorous and requires time. Two full years from the selection of a program for review to presentation of an Improvement Plan to the Board of Education for approval are needed. To insure that each step of the process conforms to the spirit and intent of the audit process, the Committee for the External Audit of Instructional Programs approves both the membership of all committees and their reports.

Goals and Overview of a Desired Program

"Determination of goals by a committee of informed and interested professionals and citizens is of immediate and long-range value. This is a superior method of involving citizens and administrators in our specific discipline." Program Manager, Social Studies Department.

This first step of the audit process incorporates viewpoints of individuals not involved as employees with the curriculum area being audited. A committee, composed of the District's certificated employees, citizens and academic and practicing professions from outside the District, formulates the goals and delineates the elements of an ideal program. They prepare a document based upon a comprehensive review of current research and educational practice by recognized authorities in the field. The statement of an ideal program reflects both the current needs of students and the committee's vision of the future discipline. Their paper is in essence an "educated guess" about the nature of a curricular program that will address the changes and technological advances of a dynamic society.

Questionnaire or Alternate Opinion Search

"The questionnaire results provide the program manager with other important responses from citizens, professional staff, and students about the acceptability and direction of the curricular program." Program Manager, Health Education Department.

At this point, an instrument is developed which asks teachers, administrators, students, parents, and other members of our community for their evaluations of both current and desired programs. Advisory groups and other people involved with the schools that the audit team will visit are the primary respondents. The District's Director of Program Evaluation assists the program manager with the development and administration of the survey instrument and helps to compile and interpret the results.

The Self-Study

"The quality that is present in a program is highlighted and recognized." Program Manager, Science Department.

The current program is analyzed and compared with the Desired Program by the program manager prior to an on-site review by a carefully selected external audit team. The first portion of the Self-Study reflects:

- o the program manager's philosophy about the curriculum area;
- o the rationale for its current structure;
- o improvements currently planned or under way;
- o evaluation of the curricular guides and materials;
- o a statement about the program's relationship to existing educational goals and the teaching strategies used to meet them; and

o an appraisal of the program's acceptance and success.

In the second part of the Self-Study, the manager compares the current program with the Desired Program and Overview Statement. The manager evaluates the discrepancies between the current program's content, approach, and teaching strategies and those of the Desired Program. The manager also considers how well the resources of the current program will support the Desired Program.

Discrepancies (The External Audit)

"We found that the external audit process interacts with, links to, is affected by, and affects:

•STUDENTS

•Teachers •The Board of Education

•Administrators •All Other Programs •Parents and Community

• District Mission and Goals •The Budget Process

•The Planning Process

•The model for curriculum development

•Key Features • External Audit Process "

Audit Team Chairman, Environmental Education.

The members of the audit team, typically 15 people, include teachers and administrators from outside Jefferson County, external "practitioners" of the discipline being audited, one member of the goals and overview committee, and lay citizens from the community. Team members are solicited from in-district groups and personnel, as well as regional and national authorities in the curriculum area. The manager of the audited program and the Directors of Instruction, in consultation with the Committee for the External Audit of Instructional Programs, select the chairman, typically a regional leader in the field under review, who receives a modest compensation for accepting the extent of the responsibility of leading the audit team. A national leader in the curriculum area is brought to the District during the audit team visit to serve as a consultant to the team.

An audit team visit requires a week and involves visits to appoximately 25 elementary, junior high, and senior high schools. These on-site visits, in addition to the goals and overview statement, the self-study, and the questionnaire and its results become the bases for the audit team's determination of discrepancies between the current program and the Desired Program.

On the last day of the team's stay, the team chairman briefly summarizes the findings of the audit in an exit interview with the senior administrators of the District (Board of Education and the Superintendent and his Cabinet), with the Committee for the External Audit of Instructional Programs, with the program manager of the particular curricular area audit, and with the various

District staff involved. Within a month, the chairman submits a final written report, which includes recommendations for both the actual and ideal programs. The report addresses practical means of implementation and the level of financial, professional, or administrative support needed for suggested program modifications.

Improvement Plan

"A solid rationale and procedure is provided for improvement. The improvement plan is broadly based on the input by the audit team, teachers and citizens as well as the curriculum department. Without the Committee for the External Audit of Instructional Programs' process, this basis for improvement would be extremely difficult to obtain by a department working alone." Program Manager, Science Department.

The Assistant Superintendent of Instruction and Directors of Elementary and Secondary Instruction meet with the program's manager to analyze the audit team's report. After talking with the goals and overview committee, representatives from the Committee for the External Audit of Instructional Programs, and other interested groups, the manager then prepares responses to the audit team's recommendations and submits them to the Curriculum Councils, the School Improvement Process Council (the District accountability group), principals, the Superintendent and others for study and comment.

These preliminary reactions form the basis for the Prospectus for Program Improvement, which the manager writes and presents to the same groups and individuals, and in addtition, to the Committee for the External Audit of Instructional Programs. The Board of Education receives and considers the final draft of this document. Its contents then enter the Disrict's process for developing curriculum.

(END OF SLIDE PRESENTATION)

Quirks of the Process

One significant problem derives from the six-year cycle for program review. Curriculum change in a large district is a slow process due to mechanics alone. The cycle could begin again for some programs before some changes from the previous audit have been in place long enough to be tested thoroughly. Yet lengthening the cycle risks the stagnation we need to avoid. The audit committee has developed a condensed version for the return audits or mini-audits to be implemented in 1987-88. We again will pilot the process using science.

A second difficulty arises from the innate, self-protective nature of the disciplines. Reviewed separately, no field lacks advocates for increased emphasis. The expert in a discipline who will suggest where to cut back with minimum loss or how to do more with less, is a rarity. As Goodlad[5] has pointed out in his ecological model of accountability, we must broaden our criteria of evaluation to take into account the impact of the achievement of one goal on the attainment of another.

In times of limited resources, optimal development of every discipline is not possible. Our oversight committee for the external audit now faces the difficult task of finding ways to achieve an integrated overview of curriculum clusters, so that the ideal can be tempered with reality most fairly in our Board's decisions on Improvement Plans.

Merits of the Audit Process

Updating and improving the quality of curriculum is the broad aim of the audit process. The external audit process is an application of the concept of long-range planning to curriculum content and delivery systems.

The audit process emphasizes input from individuals outside the curriculum program being audited. Four major benefits have emerged from this emphasis:

1. The students know that their learning experiences will be better oriented to their future needs in the "real world".

2. The teachers know that their noteworthy ideas and approaches will be recognized and incorporated into our pursuit of excellence.

3. The program directors and other instructional leaders break their concentration on local matters to look outside and re-establish intimate contact, both personal and printed, with their fields at a comprehensive, national level. In our District, change is increasingly becoming a familiar and precedented challenge, not an ill-defined threat.

4. Areas in need of improvement are identified in an objective manner, and solid rationales and procedures are provided for that improvement.

A personal fifth benefit of the audit process is that the Committee for the External Audit of Instructional Programs has become a training ground for potential Board members.

A distinctive benefit of our external audit process is the creation of a spirit of joint enterprise among citizens and educators, external practitioners, and authorities in education. Involving non-employees of the District in a detailed analysis of specific educational problems and enlisting their aid in formulating solutions creates bonds of genuine understanding. Cooperative problem solving may not be as flashy as the debate over a national educational issue, but it does create usable results.

References:

1 District Operational Objective #3, Jefferson County Schools, Colorado, June 1980.

2 Bulach, Cletus R., "An Organizational Plan for Curriculum Development", Educational Leadership, Volume 35, Number 4, January 1978, p. 308.

3 The DEM (Discrepancy Evaluation Model) was first developed by Malcolm Provus in 19871 and further developed at the Educational Research Center from 1971-1975 by a team led by Malcolm Provus.

4 National Science Teachers Association's monograph, "What Research Says to the Science Teacher", volume 3, Chapter 11.

5 Goodlad, John L., "An Ecological Version of Accountability", Theory into Practice, Education: A Vision not a Viewpoint, Volume XVIII, Number 5, December 1979, p. 311.

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